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Review Essay 77

Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780231201803 (hardcover, \$140.00); 9780231201810 (paperback, \$35.00)

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Much as ideology is often at work in US foreign policy itself without being placed self-consciously in the foreground, it quite commonly features in historical and political analysis without being named as such or made the explicit focus of discussion. When analysts do make it a direct object of study, however, the results are often illuminating. They highlight the presence and significance of value-laden ideational constructs in domains where other factors tend to receive the lion's share of emphasis. This edited collection contributes to, and advances, this ongoing enterprise that seeks to draw into the open things that are often left implicit. In doing so it succeeds, by and large, in its core aims: buttressing the case that ideology is a worthy—indeed vital—object of study if one seeks to truly understand US policy; and at the same time widening the range of topics and voices included in the discussion.

The editors locate their project squarely in the tradition of the work of Michael H. Hunt, whose 1987 book *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* was a landmark in this subfield, and whose contribution to setting the terms of the intellectual enterprise is referenced in many of the contributions.¹ Reflecting this influence, this collection adopts a broad conception of what “ideology” is. Hunt defined it as “an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.”² This stands counterposed to definitions coming out of the Marxist tradition, which understand ideology primarily as an epiphenomenon of deeper material causes, and as a contributor to “false consciousness,” that carries only marginal independent causal weight.³ It

¹ Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Numerous other scholars who have contributed to the analysis of ideas and ideology are also acknowledged, for example, Norman Graebner, ed., *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* (New York: OUP, 2012); H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: the Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, CUP, 1998); Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: the Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang 1995); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); as well as fine prior work by the editors and other contributors, such as David Milne's, *Worldmaking: the Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015). But Hunt's opus is clearly the touchstone for the project.

² This definition and variants on it are invoked in various places in the book, but this specific quotation appears, for example, at the outset of Chapter 3. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, 74.

³ This is unpacked somewhat in the introduction and in some of the contributions. See Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, “Introduction,” in McKnight Nichols and Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New*

also denudes the term of its common pejorative connotation in everyday political discourse: that “ideological” thinking is a defect to be overcome in pursuit of seeing reality more clearly and adopting a more pragmatic, efficacious approach to political action. As Hunt defines it, and as the editors frame the discussion here, ideology is something more all-encompassing than that, and more necessary. Its presence, at least in some measure, is inevitable. One should aspire to be lucid and reflective regarding its role, but should not assume that ideology can be entirely eliminated or transcended.

Adopting this broad conception of the term, this collection of essays is thus not a survey of the role in US foreign relations of “ideologies” in the sense of comprehensive, coherent frameworks of belief adjacent to (and intertwined with) formal political philosophies, such as liberalism, Marxism, conservatism, etc. The presence of systematic, fully-developed ideological worldviews like these does feature in some contributions.⁴ But in the main the collection is less an analysis of the influence of “ideologies” in the grand, formalised, systematic and self-conscious sense, than a series of studies of *ideological thinking*, and illustrations of how of ideas and concepts with an ideological dimension have been pertinent at various times to US foreign relations.

As with any edited collection—and this is a substantial one, with twenty-two contributions—the editors face a practical challenge in reconciling the variety of the contributors’ research interests and specialisms with the desire for analytical coherence of the whole. Their approach is to group essays under five broad headings, corresponding to how “ideology” has intersected in US history with “the people,” “power,” “the international,” “democracy,” and “progress.” This sets the stage for a diverse set of essays. Some offer treatments of significant ideologically freighted concepts, like civilization, freedom, fear, unilateralism, science, just war, etc.⁵ Others provide analyses of periods in US history when ideological contest shaped how the nation reckoned with major historical-sociological phenomena, such as nationhood, economic development, empire, race, democratization, and mass migration.⁶ Others deliver detailed case studies of particular political leaders, intellectuals, institutions and episodes, serving up illuminating accounts of how ideology underwrote, and manifested through, their contributions to the unfolding of US policy.⁷

Histories (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), [Hereafter McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*]:1-27., esp. 5-8. For extended treatment of the contest between “narrow” and “broad” definitions of ideology, see Michael Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴ For example, in Marc-William Palen, “Competing Free Trade Traditions in US Foreign Policy from the American Revolution to the ‘American Century,’” 115-134; or Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Michael Franczak, “Cold War Liberals, Neoconservatives, and the Rediscovery of Ideology,” 412-434, both in McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*.

⁵ For example: Benjamin A. Coates, “American Presidents and the Ideology of Civilization,” 53-73; Jeremi Suri, “Freedom as Ideology,” 281-298; Andrew Preston, “The Fearful Giant: National Insecurity and US Foreign Policy,” 169-184; McKnight Nichols, “Unilateralism as Ideology,” 185-207; Audra J. Wolfe, “Dual-Use Ideologies: How Science Came to be Part of the United States” *Cold War Arsenal*, 452-467; Raymond Haberski Jr, “Just War as Ideology: A Militant Ecumenism of Catholics and Evangelicals,” 262-278, all in McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*.

⁶ For example: Michaela Hoenicke-Moore, “Containing the Multitudes: Nationalism and US Foreign Policy Ideas at the Grassroots Level,” 74-91; Matthew Kruer, “Indigenous Subjecthood and White Populism in British America,” 31-52; Marc-William Palen, “Competing Free Trade Traditions in US Foreign Policy from the American Revolution to the ‘American Century,’” 115-134; Matthew Karp, “Antislavery and Empire: the Early Republican Party Confronts the World,” 152-168; Katharina Rietzler, “‘Mrs Sovereign Citizen’: Women’s International Thought and American Public Culture, 1920-1950,” 92-111; Daniel Tichenor, “Contentious Designs: Ideology and US Immigration Policy,” 347-363; Jay Sexton, “Capital and Immigration in the era of the Civil War,” 367-384, all in McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*.

⁷ For example: Nicholas Guyatt, “The Righteous Cause: John Quincy Adams and the Limits of American Exceptionalism,” 135-151; Emily Conroy-Krutz, “‘For Young People’: Protestant Missions, Geography, and American Youth and the End of the Nineteenth Century,” 211-230; Imaobong Umoren, “Egenia Charles, the United States, and Military Intervention in Grenada,” 231-245; Brandy Thomas Wells, “I Think of Myself as an International Citizen: Flemma P. Kittrell’s Internationalist Ideology,” 246-261; Penny Von Eschen, “Roads Not Taken: The Delhi

Throughout, there is a concerted effort to draw links between the domestic and the international dimensions of ideology in American society and politics.

In light of the wide range of the contributions, the volume cannot be as coherent as a single monograph on this topic might be. But it does offer a series of vignettes that are both informative and illustrative with regard to how ideological thinking, in varied forms, can operate. The benefit of the great range of subject matter covered by the contributions here is that it enables the editors to deliver on a primary declared purpose of the volume: to broaden the terrain covered by studies of ideology in US foreign relations. Alongside the themes one is accustomed to expect under the heading of “ideology and US foreign policy,” this volume gives attention to subjects (meaning both topics and voices) which have often been side-lined in past generations of scholarship. It draws fruitful connection between these and ideology as a frame for analysis, and in the process points the way toward potentially rich seams for continued research.

These virtues of the volume—its pluralism and scope—inevitably come at some price, in that they inhibit its capacity to lay down a cohesive, focused program of its own. There is, certainly, a sufficient shared baseline between the contributions to keep the volume functional. But the contributions vary a good deal in the degree to which they reflect on ideology as an organising concept, the consistency with which they foreground it in their analyses, and the balance they strike between the granular specificity of historical case studies and the bold sweep of long-arc discourse analysis. The editors take a pluralistic approach to ideology’s definitional boundaries, what methods are best suited to studying it, and where priority should lie for empirical investigation. The book concludes by celebrating its breadth of approaches. This is likely a necessary condition of assembling so many authors to engage a topic that is so rich in interdisciplinary potential. Nonetheless, the volume as a whole convinces with regard to its core thesis: that ideology is of “vital importance” (p.473) to understanding US foreign relations.⁸ If one is looking for analysis that applies this fundamental insight in an entirely cohesive and focused way from start to finish, an edited collection has natural limits. This one lays the ground well for scholars to pursue the topic further in numerous possible directions.

Notwithstanding the variety and range of essays, substantive themes do emerge across the set. One is a persistent desire across periods and issues to root the fundamental aims of American policy in conceptions of larger historical purpose. The editors, in their introduction and conclusion, highlight the importance of “civilization,” an idea that appears in more than one contribution explicitly and in many more implicitly.⁹ This is a rich ideological concept, bringing together elements of democracy, progress, nationalism, race, hierarchy, and more, in formulations that have varied across space and time. Ideas of who “counts” as American have played a profound part in the political evolution of the United States at home. Ideas concerning who deserves “freedom” abroad have similarly shaped US conduct and the American conception of national mission overseas. They have been a matter of constant contest between Americans (to say nothing of contest between Americans and others) and it is impossible to make sense of such contests without reference to ideology.

Declaration, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and the Lost Futures of 1989,” 299-321; Melani McAlister, “Not Just Churches: American Jews, Joint Church Aid, and the Nigeria-Biafra War,” 322-346; Daniel Bessner, “The Progressive Origins of Project RAND,” 385-411; Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Michael Franczak, “Cold War Liberals, Neoconservatives, and the Rediscovery of Ideology,” Daniel Immerwahr, “The Galactic Vietnam: Technology, Modernization, and Empire in George Lucas’s Star Wars,” 435-451, all in McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*.

⁸ McKnight Nichols and Milne, “Conclusion,” in McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*, 469-476. Quotation from 473.

⁹ McKnight Nichols and Milne, “Introduction.” Benjamin Coates in Chapter 2 picks up the theme of “civilization” most directly, but the editors are correct that in various guises it pervades the collection as a whole. Benjamin A. Coates, “American Presidents and the Ideology of Civilization,” McKnight Nichols and Milne, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations*, 53-73

A second theme that recurs is that it is neither necessary nor wise to counterpose “ideology” to the “material” in a stark binary of factors competing to explain what drives US policy. One can only sustain such a binary by adopting an unduly narrow view of what ideology is, of the kind this volume rightly resists. It is only in light of conceptions of self and self-interest, and convictions about which ends, tangible and intangible, matter most, that the influence of material factors can take practical shape. And it is only on a base of fundamental commitments in these prior regards that perceptions, interpretations, and reactions regarding developments in the external world can form. All of this is inherently ideological terrain.¹⁰

A third theme is that ideology, properly understood, consists not only of conscious but also unconscious beliefs and ideas. “Ideologies set the terms of engagement; they shape politics; and they are not static,” the editors write here. “They order and explain the world and project the illusion of controllable outcomes. They define and explain success or failure, justify and set boundaries, and compel sacrifice, aggression, or inaction. And, sometimes, their very function hides the fact that they are ideologies” (4). This last idea—that ideologies can often matter most when their believers are less than fully aware of engaging in “ideological thinking”—is an important one for study of the topic. Toward the end of this book, the editors quote one of their contributors, Raymond Haberski, observing that ideology is “the moment when you speak a language and do not know you’re doing it” (472). This is a winning turn of phrase, and one need not take it to be universally true—ideology-making can sometimes be a quite self-conscious craft—to see the wisdom of recognising this dimension. With varying degrees of self-awareness, it is a familiar characteristic of ideological thinking to exist in a state of denial that it is any such thing.¹¹

This points us, perhaps, toward another of the big questions that this collection does such a good job of opening up for discussion: what is ideology *for*? What valuable work—psychological, social, political—do ideological beliefs perform for those who hold them? Various contributions to the collection reveal that ideology and identity are often intimately connected to one another.¹² The ultimate purposes people view themselves as furthering—at the level of individual, group, or nation—are highly significant to understanding political action at both the micro and macro levels. “Ideology” as a concept is well-fitted to capturing the character of beliefs of this kind, and the purposeful, often highly consequential self-views they combine to construct, whether those self-views take the form of investing in world-historical mission or reacting sceptically against such a thing.

In sum, this edited volume convincingly makes the case for the importance of its object of study. It injects new life into the strain of intellectual inquiry pioneered in the twentieth century by Hunt and other like-minded others. It widens the aperture for the study of ideology in US foreign relations, demonstrating that the topic can and should encompass more than it once did. It strains at times to maintain total coherence of intellectual purpose within itself; this is a hazard of assembling edited collections. But the range of its contributions points the way toward multiple pathways for productive future inquiry through the further development of insights, approaches, and topics delivered here at a consistently high standard of scholarly

¹⁰ Palen, Karp, and Sexton all do an excellent job of making this apparent in their respective chapters. Palen, “Competing Free Trade Traditions in US Foreign Policy from the American Revolution to the ‘American Century,’” Sexton, “Capital and Immigration in the Era of the Civil War,” Karp, “Antislavery and Empire.”

¹¹ In addition to Haberski, the editors rightly highlight the contributions of Preston and Hoenicke-Moore in this regard. Haberski Jr, “Just War as Ideology: a militant ecumenism of Catholics and Evangelicals,” Preston, “The Fearful Giant: National Insecurity and US Foreign Policy,” Hoenicke-Moore, “Containing the Multitudes: Nationalism and US Foreign Policy Ideas at the Grassroots Level.”

¹² One can see this illustrated, directly and indirectly, in contributions here as wide-ranging in their subject matter as those of Krueger, Coates, Karp, Hoenicke-Moore, Wells, Conroy-Krutz, Guyatt, Sexton, Preston, and others. Krueger, “Indigenous Subjecthood and White Populism in British America,” Coates, “American Presidents and the Ideology of Civilization,” Karp, “Antislavery and Empire,” Hoenicke-Moore, “Containing the Multitudes: Nationalism and US Foreign Policy Ideas at the Grassroots Level,” Wells, “I Think of Myself as an International Citizen.” Conroy-Krutz, “‘For Young People,’” Guyatt, “The Righteous Cause,” Sexton, “Capital and Immigration in the era of the Civil War,” Preston, “The Fearful Giant.”

quality. For a piece of work of its type, this is a hallmark of success. If the invitation to further enquiry that this volume presents is taken up, as it deserves to be, then this may in time be regarded as an important landmark in consolidating the study of ideology in its rightful place as a major strand within study of the history of US foreign relations.

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